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ABSTRACT

A goal adopted at the 1990 Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, aims to increase the high school graduation rate to 90 percent by the year 2000. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports three types of dropout rates: (1) event rates report the percentage of students who left high school without finishing work toward a diploma in a single year; (2) status rates report the percentage of the population of a given age range who have not finished high school or are not enrolled; and (3) cohort rates report what happens to a single group of students over time. Differences exist among youth in central cities, suburban areas, and rural areas. The dropout problem is most severe in central cities, least severe in suburban areas, with nonmetro areas in the middle. Measured by either event or status rates, Hispanic youth have the highest national dropout rate among ethnic groups. African Americans have the second highest rate, and Whites the lowest. Four general implications of the baseline data developed by NCES are: (1) if high school completion is a minimum level of attainment, then the earlier a student masters a high school curriculum, the better; (2) putting the national goal into measurable form requires development of indicators pegged to progress among particular age groups and reflected in particular statistics; (3) meeting the national goal is an issue of educational equity; and (4) policies that respond to the situation of particular regions and ethnic groups may be well warranted. (KS)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools May 1991

School Completion 2000: Dropout Rates and Their Implications for Meeting the National Goal

Digest EDO-RC-91-5

THE SECOND GOAL adopted at the 1990 Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, aims to increase the high school graduation rate to 90 percent by the year 2000. To interpret this goal and to work toward it, educators and policymakers need current data on school completion and early school leaving. What is a "dropout"? What is the extent of early school leaving? How does the dropout rate vary among different groups and regions? Finally, what do available data imply about possible strategies for meeting the goal? This Digest draws on recent studies to answer these questions.

The significance of the goal

Taken together as a single statement, the national goals imply two important points about school completion. First, all the goals support *students' learning.* The point of finishing high school is to master significant knowledge. Custodial care is clearly *not* part of this effort.

Second, this particular goal embodies an *urgent* task. The number of at-risk children and youth is likely to increase, not decline. Society must take steps now to meet this developing challenge (Pallas, 1991).

Urgency, however, also pertains to school outcomes. The ultimate test of the importance of schooling is its impact on students' subsequent quality of life (Hendrick, Macmillan, & Balow, 1989). Some observers regard a twelfth-grade level of reading skill as essential to living "the good life" in the modern world (Bishop, 1991). High school completion will probably be a *minimum* expectation in the future. Although high school completion is still associated with positive life outcomes, analyses already suggest that economic returns to a high school diploma (as a terminal degree) are *declining* (Mincer, 1989).

The dynamics of school completion are not well understood (Fernandez & Shu, 1988) and cause and effect relationships are unclear (Hendrick et al., 1989). Some studies, for example, suggest that if suitable employment and educational options are not accessible, early school leaving could even be a *reasonable* response to social and economic realities (e.g., Bickel & Papagiannis, 1988).

Definitions and data: Understanding school completion

Much confusion about early school leaving stems from the variety of definitions attached to the phenomenon. Without consistent definitions and consistent efforts to collect comparable data, attempts to monitor progress toward meeting the national goal will founder. Without consistent definitions, systematic research into the phenomenon of early school leaving is also more difficult. To respond to such concerns, Congress, in Public Law 100-297, directed the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to provide an annual report on dropout and completion rates. Thus far, NCES has issued two such reports (Frase, 1989; Kaufman & Frase, 1990), which are the sources of the data summarized below.

NCES reports three types of dropout rates (cf. Frase, 1989, p. x). Each rate reveals different, but related, aspects of the phenomenon.

- *Event rates* report—within a single year—the **percentage of students** who left high school without finishing work toward a diploma. These rates reflect the actual "event" of dropping out.
- *Status rates* report—at a given point in time—the **percentage of the population** of a given age range who either (a) have not finished high school or (b) are not enrolled. These rates reflect the current "status" of a given group in the population at large (not just students).
- *Cohort rates* report—over a given period of time—what happens to **a single group of students** (for example, all those who are now 16). These rates can reflect changes that affect a given group over time.

Status and cohort rates provide a view of completion—since they can reflect what happens to students *after* they leave school. Event rates concern only the actual act of dropping out in a given year.

The two NCES reports provide comparable data only for event and status rates. Status rates reflect "the challenge for further training and education that will permit these individuals to participate more fully in the economy and the life of the nation" (Frase, 1989, p. ix). In the sections that follow, data on status rates are the primary focus of discussion.

Historical trends in dropout and school completion rates

The national status dropout rate, measured for the group aged 16 to 24, has generally *declined* in the last 20 years. In this age group, the status rate went from 16% in 1968 to less than 13% in 1989. Event rates for the nation as a whole showed a similar decline (from about 6% in the late 1970s to 4.5% in 1988). In 1989, about 4 million persons in the U.S. aged 16 to 24 were high school dropouts (Kaufman & Frase, 1990).

High school completion rates (the focus of the national goal) reflect the proportion of an age group who have either graduated or received a high school equivalency certificate. These rates, too, have changed in recent decades, with improvement among older age groups.

- Among those aged 18-19, the completion rate has *declined*, from 73.3% in 1970 to 71.6% in 1989 (in 1986 it had reached a high of 74.6%).
- Among those aged 20-21, the completion rate has been rather *stable*, hovering about 82 or 83% from 1970 to 1989.
- Among those aged 22-24, the completion rate has *increased* (from 81.9% in 1970 to 86.0% in 1989).
- Among those aged 30-34, there is a *pronounced increase*: up from 73.0% in 1970 to 86.6% in 1989.

Part of this trend can be attributed to the effect of high school

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equivalency programs, in which older persons participate more than younger persons.

Variability among central city, suburban, and rural areas

Differences in dropout rates exist among youth in central cities, suburban areas, and rural areas. The 1987-1989 average *status dropout rate* for 16 to 24 year olds is 15.4% in central cities, 12.6% in nonmetro areas, and 10.7% in suburban areas (Kaufman & Frase 1990). The 1987-1989 average *event dropout rate* is highest in central cities (6.2%), followed by nonmetro areas (4.0%). It is lowest in suburban areas (3.7%). These data confirm the hypothesis that the dropout problem is most severe in central cities, least severe in suburban areas, with nonmetro areas in the middle (Kaufman & Frase 1990).

The variability in dropout rates associated with place of residence is, however, also related to variability among ethnic groups. For example, the event dropout rate among African-American youth in *central cities* is about 8.5%—significantly higher than the 5.3% rate among central city white youth.

Curiously, the *suburban* setting seems to be associated with slightly higher dropout rates among Hispanic youth. They tend to have high event dropout rates regardless of place of residence (7.8%, 8.3%, and 7.0%, respectively, for central city, suburban, and nonmetro Hispanics).

Variability among ethnic groups

Measured by either event or status rates, Hispanic youth have the highest national dropout rate, African Americans the second highest, and whites the lowest (these relative positions, however, vary widely by geographic region or metropolitan status; see Kaufman & Frase, 1990). During the period 1987-1989, about 8% of Hispanic students dropped out school each year, an event rate almost twice as high as that for whites (about 4%); and close to 7% of black students dropped out of school each year in the same period.

Computed as status rates, data on dropouts give a somewhat different picture. In October 1989, among the population aged 16-24, 33% of Hispanics had not completed high school; only about 14% of African Americans and 12% of whites were in this category (Kaufman & Frase 1990).

Meeting the goal: Implications about graduation and completion

Kaufman and Frase (1990) do not report graduation and completion rates by place of residence or ethnic group. Four general implications, however, can be drawn from the available baseline data developed by NCES.

First, if high school completion is a minimum level of attainment (Bishop, 1991; Mincer, 1989), then—in general—the earlier a student masters a high school curriculum, the better. Those who complete high school in their late 20s or 30s (or later) miss opportunities that would otherwise be open to them. This is a situation captured by status dropout rates, but not by event rates.

Second, putting the national goal into measurable form requires development of indicators pegged to progress among particular age groups and reflected in particular statistics. Early in 1991, the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP)—charged with monitoring progress toward the goals—recommended use of five *national* indicators and three *state-by-state* indicators. The proposed indicators—including event, status, and cohort rates—may be those used for the first progress report, expected in September 1991 (NEGP, 1991).

Third, despite the apparent need for improvement among all ethnic and regional groups, it is clear that meeting the national goal is an issue of educational *equity*. Since the proportions of Hispanics and African Americans in the general population are increasing, growing concern for equity reflects emerging demographic realities. In particular, if substantial improvement in Hispanic and African American dropout rates does not take shape, the goal will probably not be met.

Fourth, policies that respond to the situation of particular regions and ethnic groups—within an overall concern for general improvement—may well be warranted.

Summing it up

At present, *86 percent* of persons aged 22 to 24 *complete* a high school diploma (either by graduating or completing an alternative certificate). By contrast, only *68 percent* of persons aged 18 to 19 *graduate* "on schedule" from high school with a regular diploma. Some in this latter group, however, also complete equivalency diplomas.

The national data, however, mask the phenomenon of early school leaving among different regions and ethnic groups. See Kaufman & Frase (1990, p. 12) for a useful cross tabulation of status dropout rates by metropolitan status, geographic region, and ethnic group. See the same source (p. 24) for a cross-tabulation of the at-risk characteristics of the 1988 cohort of eighth graders by sex and five ethnic groups.

Measuring progress toward the national goal will require the development of an indicator or array of indicators. Policies, moreover, will need to respond to the regional and ethnic diversity that structures the phenomenon of early school leaving.

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